

U.S. Owes Explanation for Forgotten Korean Massacre

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Abstract

There was much worse to come. At the modern House of Sharing in Bukchon, a scenic village of rice farmers and fishermen on the northern coast, old women recall in graphic detail the killing of hundreds in January 1949. A guide shows visitors the burial ground where large stones are strewn as the bodies were found. Small mounds mark the graves of children. Not far from Jeju International Airport, where many were buried, most of them were killed. At that time U.S. helicopters overhead. On the slopes of Mount Halla, a U.S. army communications unit was humming away. Who was ultimately responsible for these and many other episodes, known and verified, open for anyone to examine? The Americans don't actually deny complicity. They just don't say anything. That's not to say the Americans have to accept claims of a U.S. role. It's just that they owe the world, not just the victims' families, a promise to search the records and come up with documents, reports, anything revealing what the U.S. forces were up to.

Key words :

4.3 House of Sharing in Bukchon, the torching of five buildings in his village of Orari on May 1, 1948, The 4.3 Victims' Family Association, Petition, the American Silence, Jeju 4.3.

American Silence on Jeju 4.3

You have to wonder what a typical U.S. embassy does with a petition pleading a cause that some people don't want to know about.

That's the question asked by activists crusading for the families of victims of "4.3," the revolt on the idyllic island of Jeju that began on April 3, 1948, in which about 30,000 died in clashes with the Korean army and police. Two years ago, members of the 4.3 Victims' Family Association dropped off their petition with 100,000 signatures at the U.S. embassy in Seoul blaming the U.S. for backing the revolt and demanding reparations.

Hur Sang-soo, president of the Korea Social Science Research Institute, delivered the petition, including all those signatures in four boxes, to a guard at the U.S. embassy but has no idea where it went from there. What does the embassy think of this petition? Has anyone read it, glanced at the names, maybe sent it on to Washington for the State Department to consider?

You can imagine diplomatic double-talk in reply, maybe someone promising to "consider the matter." But no, Song Seung-moon, chair of the 4.3 Victims' Family Association, is still awaiting a pro forma response while beginning to accept the reality that the petition has fallen on stone-deaf ears.

The reason for the American silence, aside from the fact that the people in the embassy have more current matters to worry about between the U.S. and its putative Korean ally, is pretty obvious. They can't get excited about a revolt that happened 70 years ago. Absent hard evidence to the contrary, they doubt U.S. forces had anything to do with it.

For the petitioners, the challenge is to prove the Americans not only knew what was going on but may have influenced it or ordered it, but that's difficult. Just look at the history.

The U.S. military government took over from the Japanese in Korea in September 1945, a month or so after the Japanese surrendered on Aug. 15, and hung on until Aug. 15, 1948, third anniversary of the surrender, when Syngman Rhee was inaugurated as

the first president of the brand new Republic of Korea.

The case for American involvement rests on the appointment of ruthless Korean commanders who were responsible for wiping out villages suspected of harboring communists. The slaughter intensified several months into Rhee's presidency, spread over the remote hills and valleys around Mount Halla in 1949 and was largely over when the North Koreans invaded the South in June 1950.

For ages dictatorial governments suppressed tales of dissent, but villagers in recent years have been offering first-hand memories of the horrors. Song Seung-moon, for instance, described the torching of five buildings in his village of Orari on May 1, 1948. A rightist youth group from the mainland of South Korea, whose members had left North Korea to escape communist rule, was believed responsible. By the time that particular incident was over, 246 people had died.

There was much worse to come. At the modern House of Sharing in Bukchon, a scenic village of rice farmers and fishermen on the northern coast, old women recall in graphic detail the killing of hundreds in January 1949. A guide shows visitors the burial ground where large stones are strewn as the bodies were found. Small mounds mark the graves of children.

Not far from Jeju International Airport, where many were buried, 91-year-old Kim Chang-ju says "most of my friends were killed." Kim, who was working at the airport, saw U.S. helicopters overhead. On the slopes of Mount Halla, he says a U.S. army communications unit was humming away. He takes all that as evidence of American involvement though he saw no Americans in his village.

Who was ultimately responsible for these and many other episodes, known and verified, open for anyone to examine? The Americans don't actually deny complicity. They just don't say anything. It would be nice if they would look at that petition and let it be known what they think of it.

That's not to say the Americans have to accept claims of a U.S. role. It's just that they owe the world, not just the victims' families, a promise to search

the records and come up with documents, reports, anything revealing what the U.S. forces were up to. Simple curiosity should impel someone in Washington to look into the American mission on Jeju at the time of 4.3 even if the answer may not be all the activists believe.

Uncovering Jeju Revolt

The testimony of two grandmothers from the island province of Jeju about their brief encounters with American soldiers more than 70 years ago offers a glimmer of the U.S. role there before the outbreak of the Jeju revolt on April 3, 1948 (often called "4.3" by Koreans).

One of the women, in a taped interview screened at the 19th World Peace Island Forum, moderated by Ko Chang-hoon, professor emeritus at Jeju University, goes beyond vague references to the U.S. military government. Her memories on tape, and her response to questions at the forum, captured the fears of people on Jeju about the American soldiers whom they occasionally encountered.

This video is significant since it describes a scene in the ill-fated village of Bukchon on Jeju's northern coast. Bukchon is memorialized for a massacre in which more than 300 villagers were hacked and shot to death by rampaging South Korean police and soldiers on Jan. 17, 1949, at the height of the revolt that cost the lives of nearly 30,000 people.

It was long before the massacre, months before April 3, 1948, as the woman recalls, that U.S. soldiers visited Bukchon in search of her uncle in order to use his services as a translator. The village people were afraid of these "ko-koon nom," big-nosed people. The woman's mother shouted, "You can't take my child."

The Americans, not finding the woman's uncle, unloaded laundry detergent and C-ration cans from their helicopter as gifts. The woman remembers the pork in some of the cans was quite delicious.

More to the point, the encounter left her with the impression that these Americans, low ranking with little influence, were rather puzzled. They had no understanding of deeper issues and did not

comprehend widespread fears of police and soldiers.

Beside her, another woman about the same age recalled seeing Americans on the streets outside a small base near the island's southwestern coast. They sometimes handed out chocolate, much to her delight, she said, but that's about all she could remember about them.

Above and beyond the village level, it would help to find answers to much broader questions about relations between Americans and Koreans. We know only that the U.S. military government was still in charge when the revolt broke out and that Major General William Dean, commander of U.S. forces in Korea, visited Jeju after 4.3. In the absence of any records of what he said, it's reasonable to suspect he encouraged the police and armed forces, under Korean command, to suppress signs of unrest.

In the quest for more on what the Americans were doing or saying, we should be looking for other aging residents with long memories of ancient encounters, however incidental or isolated. The old women's stories, as told at the peace forum, may seem trivial but may also be emblematic of how the few American soldiers on the island saw their mission.

High-ranking officers, however, may have had a different view. We need to learn about their interaction with people — and to see archival evidence of whatever they were saying to their superiors as well as Korean authorities.

We do know South Korea's first president, Syngman Rhee, after taking over the newly independent government on Aug. 15, three years to the day after the Japanese surrender at the end of World War II, was eager to show off his resolve as a new leader. In that spirit, he ordered his forces to crack down much more severely than they'd been doing during the American occupation. The result was the chain of events that led to the Bukchon massacre and many others.

One regrettable aspect about historiography on Jeju is the revolt received virtually no coverage abroad or, for that matter, in the censored Korean media. We have heard that a correspondent for a Chicago newspaper may have written about the ongoing

tragedy, but no one has seen his work. We have no idea if he was actually on the island.

One well-known journalist, Keyes Beech, then based in Tokyo, covered both the Korean and Vietnam wars for the Chicago Daily News. That once-distinguished newspaper has long since gone out of business but should survive in libraries in Chicago. It would be useful for an enterprising researcher to go through these files, in microfilm or print, in search of whatever Beech may have written. (His daughter, Hannah Beech, based in Bangkok for The New York Times, might also have suggestions.)

For that matter, the Chicago Tribune, for which I worked for five years as Far East and then U.N. correspondent, may have had a man in Japan at the time. That paper still publishes — and may let a researcher check its files.

As we pursue the history of 4.3, it is not enough to assume the Americans were complicit simply because the U.S. military government was in control until Aug. 15, 1948. The memories of two grandmothers are not only emotionally moving but also historically useful — an intimation of much more to be gleaned from archival research and testimony.

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